

Great Ming 461

Chapter 461 Not Nearly Enough

Wu Shen didn't march onward. He turned back, his grand relief expedition reduced to a retreat.

The Baishui County Magistrate had been ladling out thin gruel to starving peasants, but that was over now. Wu Shen arrived, waved his hand like a weary god, and said, "Everyone—go to Chengcheng County."

The peasants blinked, confused but obedient. They packed their bowls and children, and shuffled toward the promised land.

But those weren't the people Wu Shen was truly worried about.

The real problem was the rebels.

He had an idea—a desperate one, but still an idea. Chengcheng County was fertile, stable, and already under Dao Xuan Tianzun's invisible protection. If anywhere could absorb thousands of ex-bandits and turn them into farmers, that was the place.

Yan'an Prefecture.

The air smelled of blood and fear.

Governor-General Hong Chengchou stood at the edge of a killing field. He had just executed the rebel leader Liu Liu and two hundred of his closest lieutenants. The "surrender banquet" had ended with the clatter of blades and the wet thud of bodies.

Liu Liu's eyes were still open—wide, glassy, and defiant.

General He Renlong prodded the corpse with his boot until it rolled face down. It made the scene slightly easier to look at.

Hong didn't step closer; he didn't want the blood on his official robes. He merely asked, "What about the rest?"

"Three thousand followers still outside," He Renlong said quietly.

Hong hesitated. He was a hard man—he'd ordered plenty of executions without blinking—but three thousand? That was no punishment, that was a massacre.

He looked to the heavens, muttering to himself, "Kill them, and Heaven weeps. Spare them, and chaos returns."

The dilemma was older than the dynasty itself.

He remembered years ago, when he'd passed through Chengcheng County as Grain Intendant. Gao Family Village had been a green jewel in the wasteland. Someone had asked him then: 'What should be done about the rebels?'

He'd answered in one word: "Kill."

Now he wasn't so sure.

Just then, an aide arrived, bowing deeply. "Censor Wu Shen requests audience."

Hong's eyes brightened. "Good. He has money."

The two men met, exchanged a few polite lines of official fencing, and got straight to business.

Hong said bluntly, "I've executed Liu Liu, but his three thousand men remain. I can't bring myself to slaughter them. Draw me two hundred thousand taels from your relief funds. We'll settle them instead."

Wu Shen's jaw dropped. "Two hundred thousand?! For three thousand people? Governor, are you mad?"

Hong gave a humorless smile. "Not mad—realistic. Land, oxen, tools, seed, and food until harvest. Count it all, and you'll see—two hundred thousand isn't generous, it's barely humane."

Wu Shen rubbed his temples. Thank heaven for Chengcheng County, he thought grimly. If I hadn't found that oasis, I'd be broke by breakfast.

"I can't give you silver," he said carefully, "but I can take those three thousand men off your hands."

Hong arched a brow. "Oh? How?"

"Chengcheng County will handle it," Wu Shen said with quiet triumph. "They've been spared by fortune—and by faith. They can feed and settle them."

"Chengcheng County?" Hong repeated, half in disbelief. The name stirred a flicker of memory—that strange village, that Heavenly Lord, that ridiculous Hot Pot Festival.

He almost smiled. "Can they handle it?"

Wu Shen straightened. "Whether they can or not—they must. We all serve His Majesty, Governor. The burden is shared."

Hong's expression sharpened. "He Renlong!"

The general stepped forward, saluting. "Governor?"

"Escort the three thousand followers to Chengcheng County. Deliver them to the Magistrate personally. I want to see how this miracle county handles three thousand devils."

He Renlong looked uneasy. "My troops are from Yansui, sir. We can't legally cross into Shaanxi."

Wu Shen waved it off. "With an imperial envoy here, legality is a suggestion. Go."

He Renlong nodded grimly. "As you command."

He chose a thousand soldiers, gathered the three thousand captives, and began the long march southeast—through the jagged passes of the Huanglong Mountains, toward the waiting fields of Chengcheng.

Wu Shen adjusted his robes, ready to depart as well.

"Wait," Hong Chengchou called.

Wu Shen froze mid-step. "Yes, Governor?"

Hong said, "I still need two hundred thousand taels."

Wu Shen's composure cracked. "What?! I just solved your rebel problem!"

Hong sighed. "The Yansui garrisons haven't been paid in years. If I don't send them silver soon, they'll become the next rebel problem. And believe me, when soldiers revolt, they're much deadlier than farmers with pitchforks."

Wu Shen's lips twitched. He wanted to swear—really, truly, gloriously swear—but his education wouldn't let him.

He forced a smile that could have curdled wine. "Fine. You'll have your silver."

As he turned away, he muttered under his breath, "A million taels wouldn't be enough. Not nearly enough..."

Huanglong Mountains

He Renlong rode at the front of his column, cutting through mist and pine.

Unlike most generals, who hid behind their flags, He Renlong preferred the front line. He was a jinshi of war—a scholar with blood under his nails. His men called him Madman He.

A scout rode up. "General, we're nearly at Chengcheng. Two more peaks, then Bai Family Fortress."

"Good," He Renlong grunted.

"Sir," the scout added nervously, "marching through these passes is dangerous. The rebels could ambush us. Perhaps you should ride farther back?"

He Renlong laughed—a booming, reckless sound. "An ambush? Perfect. Saves me the trouble of finding them."

The universe, always obliging, granted his wish.

No sooner had the words left his mouth than shadows moved in the trees.

An army burst from the forest ahead—ragged, unarmored, but burning with defiance.

He Renlong's grin widened.

"Rebels! Excellent!" he shouted, raising his blade. "I'll crush them myself!"

And with that, Madman He charged straight into the storm.

Chapter 462 Here is Prison Valley

The army that burst from the woods wasn't some rebel band at all — it was the Gao Family Village Militia, marching under Cheng Xu.

They'd come on the Tianzun orders to rendezvous with the government troops and take custody of the three thousand surrendered rebels.

Naturally, since this was an "official meeting," the militia had been told to look the part — no rifles, no uniforms, just cotton clothes and cold steel, posing as a simple county defense force.

It should have been a polite handover.

Should have.

From across the clearing, He Renlong spotted the group emerging from the treeline. No flags. No formation. Cotton shirts and blades.

To him, that screamed ambush.

Without a second thought, he roared, spurred his warhorse, and charged.

Cheng Xu, still stepping forward to greet him, blinked in disbelief.

Wait—what? Is this man insane?

He barely had time to curse before the general's spear flashed toward him.

The strike came like thunder — one thrust splitting into a dozen feints, each glittering like a ghostly spearhead. The air itself seemed to scream.

Cold sweat broke across Cheng Xu's back. He whipped out his saber and met the attack head-on.

"CLANG!"

The impact numbed his arm from shoulder to wrist. The force hurled him backward, rolling through the dust like a kicked log.

Sweet merciful ancestors, this guy hits like an ox wearing armor.

He Renlong pulled his horse up sharply, eyes gleaming. "Oh? Not bad. Didn't expect a bandit to have actual skill."

"Bandit?!" Cheng Xu sputtered, spitting out grit. I'm literally here on orders!

He had no time to explain. The spear was already coming again.

But this time—

"BANG!"

A great axe slammed down from the side, locking against the spear with a metallic screech that echoed through the mountains. Sparks flew.

The force jolted through He Renlong's arms. He reeled his horse back, blinking at the mountain of a man standing before him — Zheng Daniu, muscles like a fortress, face calm as a storm.

He Renlong's voice was sharp. "Name yourself! What rebel rabble are you?"

Zheng Daniu bellowed, "Rebel, my foot! I'm a law-abiding citizen!"

The general's lips curled. "You? You look like the dictionary definition of 'bandit.'"

"Yeah?" Zheng Daniu retorted, pointing at himself. "From head to toe — all honest!"

He Renlong squinted. "From head to toe, I see nothing but fool."

A moment of silence.

Even the wind hesitated.

Then, mercifully, a voice shouted from the distance:

"A misunderstanding! Stop fighting! STOP FIGHTING!"

Fang Wushang came crashing through the underbrush like an arrow loosed from Heaven, his armor gleaming. "Chengcheng County Patrol Inspector Fang Wushang! These men are our county militia! We're here to receive the surrendered rebels!"

He Renlong lowered his spear slightly but still scowled. "You call this discipline? Your militia's out here playing bandit dress-up. No wonder I attacked first."

Fang Wushang wasn't one for subtlety. "You attacked before asking a single question! Maybe you're the one lacking discipline!"

"Discipline?" He Renlong snapped. "In times like these, hesitation gets you killed!"

Fang Wushang jabbed a finger back. "So does charging first and thinking later!"

The two of them were in each other's faces within seconds, voices rising like dueling drums.

Meanwhile, Cheng Xu and Zheng Daniu just stood off to the side, arms crossed, watching the argument unfold.

"Typical Fang," Cheng Xu murmured with a grin. "Fearless and loud."

"Yep," Zheng Daniu said. "He'd argue with a thunderstorm if it barked wrong."

Eventually, the shouting died down — not because either man conceded, but because they'd run out of breath.

He Renlong exhaled sharply. "Fine. Enough talk. I'm handing over the three thousand surrendered rebels. They're your problem now. Keep them in line. If they riot, don't blame Yansui troops."

Cheng Xu smiled disarmingly. "No problem, General. Once they're in our care, they won't even think about rebelling."

He Renlong's brows furrowed. He couldn't tell if that confidence was arrogance or insanity. "We'll see about that," he muttered. "I'll escort you. I want to see what miracle you're hiding in these hills."

They wound through the tangled paths of the Huanglong Mountains until they reached a wide valley mouth flanked by twin grey fortresses. Archers lined the battlements, bows drawn and waiting.

At a barked order, the three thousand surrendered rebels were herded inside like cattle.

The valley opened into a massive settlement—houses, fields, workshops. Smoke curled lazily from chimneys. People moved with quiet purpose.

The newcomers stared, bewildered.

"What... is this place?" one muttered.

Even He Renlong looked uneasy. "You mean to tell me you built a fortress in the middle of the mountains? What is this, a hidden army camp?"

Fang Wushang grinned. "Not a camp, General. A prison. Chengcheng County Prison Valley. Our own special little reform paradise."

He Renlong blinked. "You've imprisoned... how many?"

"Seven thousand," Fang said casually. "Mostly former rebels. Add your three thousand, and we'll cross ten thousand before lunch."

"Ten—ten thousand?" He Renlong's voice cracked. "Are you insane? Gather that many rebels in one place, and if they revolt, you'll have a private apocalypse!"

Fang Wushang just shrugged. "Revolt? Not likely. Once they've been through our 'reeducation program,' rebellion's the last thing on their minds."

Right on cue, a voice rang out from the crowd of new arrivals.

"Qi Cheng! What the hell are you doing here? Weren't you with Wang Zuogua's lot?"

The prisoner he called to turned, startled. "Chen Ergou? You too? I thought you were with Liu Liu!"

Chen Ergou grimaced. "Liu Liu's dead. We all got captured."

Qi Cheng sighed. "Same story here. Wang Zuogua's gone. Been in labor reform ever since."

He patted his rough-spun shirt and gave a weary grin. "But you know what? It's not so bad. You'll see soon enough."

He Renlong stood there, speechless, trying to decide if Chengcheng County was a miracle—or a madhouse.

Somewhere behind him, Fang Wushang was already shouting orders to organize the new arrivals.

The banners of the county militia fluttered in the wind above the twin fortresses, catching the pale mountain light.

To the imperial soldiers, it looked less like a prison—and more like an entirely new kind of kingdom.

Trivia :

Martial DNA of China

We've seen He Renlong's spear blur into a dozen shimmering points and Zheng Daniu's axe crack the air like thunder.

That kind of battlefield choreography didn't spring from nowhere.

So — were ancient Chinese people really that good at fighting?

Short answer: Yes... and no.

Long answer: They lived in a civilization that trained for violence with bureaucratic efficiency.

1. Mandatory Weapon Literacy

From the Zhou dynasty onward, even scholars were expected to know how to draw a bow.

By the Ming, the civil and military examination system produced military jinshi — literal PhDs in sword-swinging. Candidates had to demonstrate archery, horse-riding, and tactical theory. Fail the essay, fine; drop your spear mid-kata, career over.

2. The Standing-Army Century

Ming China fielded one of the largest professional armies on earth — about one million men at its peak.

Training manuals like Ji Xiao Xin Shu (戚继光's "New Book of Effective Discipline") drilled soldiers in formations, unarmed combat, and coordination that would make a modern drill sergeant nod in approval.

So yes, some really could disarm you before breakfast.

3. Civilian Kung Fu Was Survival Tech

Peasants and townsfolk lived through bandit raids, pirate incursions, and—during bad dynastic decades—local warlords.

Martial arts weren't "sports"; they were insurance policies.

Each region developed its own style depending on terrain: coastal staff schools, mountain sword work, canal-town wrestling.

The romance of kung fu came centuries later; the practicality was always there.

4. Weapons, Not Superpowers

Despite the legends, nobody truly leapt rooftops or shot energy waves.

But with iron-forged sabers, lamellar armor, and regimented drilling, a trained Ming soldier could outmaneuver most contemporaries.

And when the psychological side of battle counts as half the fight, that discipline looked like magic.

5. Why They Seem Superhuman to Us

Our ancestors weren't born stronger; they just had fewer safety nets.

Farm by day, fight off raiders by night — do that for twenty years and you, too, develop "mystical" reflexes.

In a world without gyms, daily survival was CrossFit.

So when Dao Xuan Tianzun's puppets or He Renlong's spear dances flash across the page, they're not exaggerations — they're poetic echoes of a society that treated combat as craft, virtue, and livelihood rolled into one.

In short: ancient China didn't invent magic fists.

It invented method — and that's what made its warriors legendary.

Chapter 463 Let Them Be

When Chen Ergou woke up that morning, he thought he was walking into freedom — farmland, sunlight, a new life.

By noon, he realized he'd just traded one mountain hideout for another — only this one had walls and archers.

He squinted around the "settlement."

Except for the guards, everyone wore the same grayish cotton rags.

And the smell — not quite prison, not quite workshop, but something in between: the scent of sweat, bamboo, and resignation.

"Qi Cheng! Is that you?" he shouted, spotting a familiar scarred face hauling a basket. "Didn't you ride with Wang Zuogua's band? What are you doing here?"

Qi Cheng looked up, oddly serene. "Ah, Brother Ergou. Long time. I'm in... labor reform."

"Labor what?"

"Labor reform," Qi Cheng repeated solemnly. "We work to wash away our sins. The Tianzun teaches: those who have burned and killed must now weave and plant. Boundless blessings."

Chen Ergou blinked. "What the hell happened to you? Last I saw you, you were cutting heads, not weaving cloth."

Qi Cheng smiled faintly. "That was before enlightenment."

"Enlightenment my ass! They said we'd be settled, given land to till!"

Qi Cheng sighed. "Settle? You think anyone's giving bandits free farms? No. We've sinned too much. But here—" he gestured at the humming rows of looms and dye vats "—we get food, shelter, and work. You labor, you live. You rebel, you disappear."

Chen Ergou's jaw dropped. "So we got tricked."

Qi Cheng nodded, still smiling that eerie, devotional smile. "But you'll get used to it. Once you've eaten three steady meals and stopped running from soldiers, rebellion starts to look overrated."

"Boundless blessings," Chen Ergou muttered, more like a curse this time.

Meanwhile, on the watchtower above, General He Renlong stood with arms crossed, frowning at the organized chaos below.

"Ten thousand prisoners," he said. "And not a single riot? What kind of witchcraft is this?"

Beside him, Zhong Gaoliang clasped his hands behind his back, wearing the polite smile of a man who knew more than he'd say.

"It's not witchcraft, General. It's routine. We don't suppress them with fear. We give them purpose. A hungry man fights; a fed one works. And if he believes it's for redemption—well, that's even better."

He Renlong squinted down. "I see women weaving, old men making baskets. Where are the guards?"

Zhong gestured. "They're the guards."

He Renlong was silent a moment, then grunted. "You teach them to make cloth and bamboo goods. And the classes?"

"Morality lessons," Zhong said with a perfectly straight face. "Cause and effect, good and evil, karmic retribution. You'd be surprised how many ex-bandits discover virtue once they realize it comes with dinner."

He Renlong rubbed his temple. "I don't know if that's brilliant or insane."

"Why not both?" Zhong replied, smiling faintly.

By dusk, He Renlong had seen enough. He mounted his horse, shaking his head. "You people in Chengcheng County are either saints or swindlers. Either way, these ten thousand devils are your problem now. I'm going back to Yan'an."

The march back was fast and quiet. Without prisoners to wrangle, the army moved like wind over stone.

When He Renlong reported to Governor Hong Chengchou, the man listened in thoughtful silence.

"So they've imprisoned them all?" Hong asked, brows furrowed.

"Yes, Governor. Over ten thousand men, women, and elders. But they're not starving. They're weaving cloth, building tools, even learning morality."

Hong Chengchou leaned back in his chair, tapping his fan against his palm.

"Ah... so that's how Chengcheng County sustains them."

His tone turned wry. "They've turned our rebel problem into an industry."

He Renlong frowned. "Industry?"

Hong chuckled softly. "You haven't been to Jiangnan, have you? Down there, they've been running silk workshops for decades — all women, all laboring sixteen hours a day for a handful of rice. Profit is the only gospel. Chengcheng County has simply found a clever way to get free workers."

He looked up, eyes glinting. "Brilliant, really. We capture the rebels, they convert them into spinning hands. They feed them just enough to live and call it 'redemption.' A perfect cycle."

He Renlong was aghast. "So they're using them for profit?"

"Of course," Hong said, smiling coldly. "But why should I care? These rebels would've been corpses anyway. If someone can turn dead weight into cloth and grain, let them. From now on—" he turned to his aides— "any surrendered rabble from Yansui or beyond, send them all to Chengcheng County. Let them all 'repent through weaving.'"

He Renlong hesitated. "And if Chengcheng can't handle more?"

Hong Chengchou snapped his fan shut with a sharp whack. "Then let's see how much 'Boundless Blessing' their Tianzun truly has."

Chapter 464 The New Labor Reform Prisoners

Chen Ergou followed Qi Cheng through the narrow passageways of the so-called cells—and what he saw almost made him forget he was supposed to be a prisoner.

Four men to a room, straw mats lined neatly on the floor. Each spot had not just one, but two full sets of cotton clothes folded beside it.

Cotton.

Not coarse hemp. Not patched-up rags. Cotton.

Chen Ergou froze mid-step, eyes wide. "What in Heaven's name—where'd you get these?"

Qi Cheng replied matter-of-factly, "The Tianzun gave them to us."

Chen Ergou blinked. "The... what now?"

Qi Cheng turned solemnly toward a portrait pasted on the wall and bowed deeply.

It was an image of Dao Xuan Tianzun, the Immortal Lord who punished evil and rewarded virtue. His likeness was printed by the Gao Family Village Bookshop and distributed across Chengcheng County—especially in "reform centers" like this one. Nearly every cell had one.

Qi Cheng's voice softened with reverence. "This is Dao Xuan Tianzun, the immortal who strikes down the wicked and blesses the good. Everything we eat, everything we wear—it all comes from his divine grace."

Chen Ergou was halfway through rolling his eyes when—

He froze.

He could've sworn the portrait's eyes had just... moved.

"Whoa!" he yelped, stumbling back. "Brother Qi Cheng, his eyes—his eyes moved!"

Qi Cheng didn't even flinch. "Blessings upon us. What's strange about that?" He smiled faintly, proud even. "When my sins were heavy, he never looked my way. But lately, I've worked hard—atoned, labored honestly—and now the Heavenly Lord glances at me sometimes. It means he's seen my change."

Qi Cheng, of course, didn't know that Dao Xuan Tianzun had recently developed the 'Co-Sensing' ability—a miraculous feature that let his divine consciousness peer directly into their world.

Chen Ergou, heart still pounding, dared a second look. The painted eyes were still again. Maybe he'd imagined it. But from that moment on, he didn't dare take the portrait lightly.

One might not believe in gods or Buddhas... but one did not risk disrespecting them.

Then came a clack-clack-clack-clack! echoing through the prison.

To Chen Ergou, that sound was the unmistakable rhythm of war drums—villages striking hollow bamboo to warn of bandit attacks. His instincts kicked in before his mind did.

"Enemy attack!" he shouted, reaching for a weapon that wasn't there—then remembered he was a prisoner.

Qi Cheng, on the other hand, grinned. "Mealtime!"

"...What?"

"It's the lunch call. Come on, let's go eat."

Chen Ergou's stomach growled at the mere mention. He'd barely eaten since surrendering—just a few crumbs of dry ration along the mountain road. He wasn't above admitting he was starving.

"They... feed you here?" he asked skeptically.

"Of course," Qi Cheng said. "Otherwise, we'd all be dead already."

"Fair point."

Chen Ergou followed as streams of men poured from their cells—tens of thousands of prisoners moving in an orderly line toward the dining hall. He expected chaos. Instead, he found discipline. Even the roughest bandits queued neatly, hands behind their backs, silent but not sullen.

He and Qi Cheng made it to the front. Female workers—also prisoners—carried enormous wooden basins filled to the brim. Chen Ergou braced himself for watery gruel.

Then he saw what was inside.

White flour buns.

Soft. Plump. Steaming.

He froze like a statue.

In his world, only landlords' sons ate white flour. Commoners lived and died on coarse grains. And yet here, in a prison, the air was thick with the smell of freshly steamed wheat.

Qi Cheng chuckled. "Looks like today's labor will need real strength. Heavy work means good food."

A woman ladling buns confirmed, "That's right! You'll be laying railway tracks today. Lots of wood, lots of iron. Eat well, work hard."

Chen Ergou's brain stalled. Railway? He didn't even know what that word meant.

The woman waved at him impatiently. "What are you gawking for? Come get your buns!"

"These are... for me?"

She smirked. "You think we're pretending? You're one of the new ones, huh? Listen—if you're still hungry, take another. But don't waste it. If we catch you wasting food, you'll fast tomorrow."

Her tone carried the weary authority of someone who'd seen every kind of fool pass through. Chen Ergou felt his pride bristle—but hunger was a stronger master.

"Thank you, big sister," he said meekly, grabbing two. "Maybe... one more?"

She sighed but handed him another.

Three buns in hand, one already stuffed in his mouth, Chen Ergou felt his throat tighten with something dangerously close to tears.

"Eat quickly!"

The shout came from the wall—Zhong Gaoliang, the warden himself, flanked by heavily armed guards. Security had doubled since the new arrivals came. A thousand militia under Cheng Xu still lingered, ensuring the valley remained locked down tight.

Zhong Gaoliang's voice boomed over the crowd. "Eat fast! When the incense stick burns out, every able man reports to the main gate. Today's work—railway construction. Heavy labor, but safer than battle. Dao Xuan Tianzun watches those who work hard. Slack off, and he'll see that too!"

The men laughed nervously, but none doubted it. Not after seeing what that portrait's eyes could do.

And so the prisoners of Chengcheng's valley prison—ten thousand former bandits, killers, and rebels—ate their white buns under the watchful gaze of a god who was both warden and redeemer.

Trivia :

The Great Famine of the Late Ming Dynasty

If you're wondering why Chen Ergou's rebellion and hunger hit so hard—well, it's because the 17th century Ming Empire was literally starving to death.

From the 1620s to 1640s, China was struck by one of the worst famines in its recorded history. Droughts scorched the north, locusts devoured crops, and sudden freezes killed what little remained.

The region of Shaanxi, where this story takes place, was especially cursed. Contemporary records describe years when "no rain fell for three summers, the rivers dried, and men ate bark and clay."

The numbers? Historians estimate that tens of millions perished—some sources say up to 20–30 million dead across North China during the collapse. Villages emptied overnight. Starving peasants turned to banditry not out of malice but sheer survival.

That's why rebel bands like Chen Ergou's existed in the first place. They weren't "villains" in the usual sense—they were the failed harvest made flesh.

The Ming court, bankrupt from wars and corruption, couldn't feed its own soldiers, let alone its people.

Chapter 465 The Dao Xuan Tianzun Prize Quiz Festival

The steamed buns had done wonders for Chen Ergou's spirit. Belly full, he followed Qi Cheng to the prison gates, joining the growing crowd of labor reform prisoners assembling there.

That's when he noticed something interesting.

The prison held seven thousand people, but of those, barely two thousand were able-bodied men. The rest—five thousand—were the elderly, women, and children.

The newly arrived defectors, though only three thousand strong, boasted half as able-bodied men—around fifteen hundred.

To any ordinary official, these numbers meant little.

But to an old vagrant and bandit like Chen Ergou, numbers always told a story.

The math meant the older inmates had been beaten into submission—captured after losing a fight, their strongest men dead or crippled. But his own group? They'd surrendered under the flag of "amnesty." Their chiefs were dead, but most of the muscle had survived.

Add the two together, and that gave the prison almost four thousand working men—enough to form a small army.

And that kind of power... always attracted an alpha.

At the front of the crowd, a burly man stood on a wooden platform, barefoot but proud, his ragged prisoner's tunic doing little to hide the authority that clung to him like armor.

He spoke in a booming, soldier's voice:

"No need to talk about the old-timers—you all know me already. But you newcomers, you don't know who I am, do you?"

"My surname's Chen. I used to be a centurion in the Guyuan border army. When General Lao Nanfeng was released, he handed this place over to me!"

He swept his gaze over the crowd—hard, unblinking. "You new brats better remember this. In my eyes, every one of you is a chance for merit. If you cause trouble, bully others, or stir up rebellion... well, there's only one cure for that."

He raised a calloused fist and grinned. "A good old-fashioned beating."

The prisoners chuckled nervously.

Centurion Chen's grin widened. "You see, every time I beat some fool back into line, I earn merit. Merit means an earlier release. So, you can bet I love beating troublemakers half to death."

Standing in the back, Chen Ergou elbowed Qi Cheng and muttered, "He's trying to be the boss of the prison."

Qi Cheng didn't even blink. "Trying? He is the boss."

Chen Ergou smirked. "Isn't he afraid someone tougher'll show up and knock him down?"

Qi Cheng shrugged. "There was someone tougher once. That man's already been released. Now, Centurion Chen runs the place. My advice? Don't test him."

Chen Ergou chuckled under his breath. "I don't plan to. But our Liulian Army's not exactly short on bruisers. I'd bet someone's about to take the bait."

Right on cue, a mountain of a man stepped out from the new arrivals—thick arms, thick neck, thick skull.

"So, you're Centurion Chen, huh? Trying to scare us new guys? What a coincidence—I used to be a centurion too."

He stomped up to the platform. "Name's Wu. Centurion Wu."

Chen raised an eyebrow. "Where'd you serve, Brother Wu?"

"Ningxia," Wu replied proudly. "And I'm not afraid of you Guyuan dogs."

That was all it took.

Words ended. Fists began.

The two rolled up their sleeves, eyes flashing with that old border-soldier madness—men who'd seen too many winters, lost too many friends, and still believed a bloody nose could fix anything.

Up on the prison wall, a young guard flinched. "Should we stop them?"

An older guard held up a hand, smirking. "Let them fight. You need a boss in a place like this. Otherwise, you get factions, riots, chaos. Once there's one winner, everyone falls in line."

The younger guard hesitated—then nodded slowly.

Made sense.

Just then, a commotion broke out further down the wall. Instructor He—his face half-covered with a black cloth—came rushing up, holding something in both hands as if it were the imperial jade seal itself.

The guards blinked. "Instructor He, what in the world—?"

"Make way!" Cheng Xu barked. "Clear the best viewing spot. Dao Xuan Tianzun wants to watch the fight!"

"What?!" everyone exclaimed.

Under their stunned eyes, Cheng Xu carefully set down a small puppet-like figure carved of fragrant wood and gilded with lacquer—a miniature Dao Xuan Tianzun. Its painted eyes gleamed, its wooden jaw clacked like an automaton. The air itself seemed to hush.

Then, with a crackle-pop like a burning fuse, the puppet's mouth opened—and it spoke.

"The Dao Xuan Tianzun Prize Quiz Festival now begins!" the voice rang out, half divine, half mechanical. "Whichever side correctly guesses the winner shall share one Xi Zhi Lang fruit jelly."

The crowd went dead silent.

Then pandemonium.

A Xi Zhi Lang fruit jelly was no ordinary treat. It was the rarest of immortal confections, bestowed only by Dao Xuan Tianzun himself. The last time one appeared in Xi'an, a steward from the Prince of Qin's Mansion had paid a small fortune for it. The seller became rich overnight.

Naturally, everyone wanted a bite of destiny.

Cheng Xu shouted first, "I'm betting on Centurion Chen from Guyuan!"

Fang Wushang followed, "Chen as well!"

Zhong Gaoliang nodded coolly. "Centurion Chen."

The prison guards chimed in—"Chen!"

The militia echoed—"Chen!"

Zheng Daniu crossed his arms, squinting. "You're all fools. If everyone bets on Chen, even if he wins, you'll be sharing crumbs. Real winners play the odds. I bet on Centurion Wu from Ningxia! If I'm right, that entire Xi Zhi Lang jelly is mine!"

Dao Xuan Tianzun's puppet clattered with glee. "Excellent! Excellent! Now that's the spirit of gambling! Half of you bet one way—it's boring. But this? This is fun."

All bets were in.

Down below, fists started flying.

The two centurions slammed into each other like rams in mating season—mud flying, blood spattering, the air filled with the sound of grunts and knuckles. Both were hardened soldiers from the frontiers, both deadly. But Centurion Chen had been eating well and sleeping in Gao Family Village's "prison paradise" for years, while Centurion Wu had lived half-starved on campaign.

Within ten moves, Chen swept Wu's legs out from under him, sending the Ningxia brute crashing to the dirt. Then Chen leapt on top, pounding until Wu's face looked like a steamed bun filled with bruises.

Wu gasped for air, spat blood, and croaked, "I yield!"

Cheers erupted from the walls.

The guards roared. The militia whooped. Even the puppet of Dao Xuan Tianzun bobbed approvingly, its wooden jaw clicking like a divine applause machine.

Only Zheng Daniu groaned, clutching his head. "Nooooo! My delicious Xi Zhi Lang jelly! Gone! I'm ruined!"

"Dao Xuan Tianzun sees your despair," said the puppet serenely. "He finds it amusing."

With the prison hierarchy now neatly decided, Zhong Gaoliang wasted no time. "Good! Order's established. Move out!"

Under his direction, the guards and militia formed up the ranks, escorting four thousand labor reform prisoners out through the valley gate.

They didn't have to march far before the horizon split open—revealing a massive worksite sprawling beside Bai Family Fortress.

And then came the sound.

Choooom... chooom... chooom.

A deafening rumble rolled through the valley as a colossal electric locomotive appeared, hauling cars piled with timber and metal. The sun gleamed off its painted steel like the armor of a god.

The prisoners froze, wide-eyed.

None of them had ever seen such a thing.

Even old Chen Ergou, who'd seen more chaos than he could count, whispered under his breath:

"What in the nine hells... is that?"

Chapter 466 I'm Going South to See Hequ County!

Li Daoxuan—manifested this time as the plush, wide-eyed puppet of Dao Xuan Tianzun—perched on Bai Mao's shoulder armor, staring north toward a lonely city wrapped in the winter light.

Hequ had become an island of stone and defiance.

Nineteen imperial camps—more than twenty thousand soldiers—ringed the city in a perfect circle, cutting off every road, every courier, every whisper of help.

That was the tax for calling yourself King.

Once, Wang Jiayin had swaggered at the head of three hundred and fifty thousand bandits and drifters. Now, fewer than a third still answered his banners.

Because bandits are bandits—half-wolves, half-beggars. They followed the smell of silver, not the sound of loyalty. Expecting them to understand unity was like asking a pack of rats to build a bridge. If they did, they wouldn't be bandits; they'd be bureaucrats.

Bai Mao exhaled softly.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun," he said, "not long ago, Wang Er and I were riding with Wang Jiayin's army. Now he's surrounded by imperial troops. I... can't help feeling a little..."

He couldn't find the word.

Li Daoxuan's plush, paw-like hand patted his cheek—comforting yet wordless.

Bai Mao understood. It was that odd guilt of a former thug watching his old drinking buddies march toward the gallows: half pity, half relief, no tears required.

Then came Wang Cheng'en, Grand General of Shaanxi, striding up with officers in tow. His voice cracked the air:

"Where are the shield wagons I ordered? How many finished?"

A lieutenant puffed up. "Five, my lord!"

Moments later, a detail of soldiers trundled five massive wooden walls on wheels into view.

Bai Mao blinked. The things looked like mobile fortresses—timber faces plated with rawhide, big enough to hide a dozen men. Soldiers crouched behind them, invisible to arrows or bullets. He imagined five rolling forward together like slow, invincible beasts. Against that, what could musketeers even do?

He leaned close to his tiny passenger. "Dao Xuan Tianzun, these shield wagons look unstoppable. Our muskets couldn't scratch them."

Li Daoxuan smiled, the corners of his painted mouth twitching.

"Cannons," he said simply.

Bai Mao got it instantly. What gunpowder couldn't dent, high-caliber artillery could turn into sawdust.

But Wang Cheng'en was already barking new orders.

"Remember Shaanxi Grand General Wang Guoliang's defeat? Wang Jiayin seized two Western cannons in that battle. He's mounted them in Hequ. Shield wagons alone won't cut it."

Bai Mao gaped. "The rebels have cannons now?"

Dao Xuan Tianzun's wooden eyes glinted. "Then use cannons against cannons."

As if on cue, Wang Cheng'en turned. "Have the local officials delivered the pieces I requisitioned?"

"Yes, my lord! The Governor of Shanxi sent four Western guns—they're en route!"

"Excellent. Position them behind the shield wagons. Protect the advance!"

Bai Mao's brow furrowed. "So warfare is about... countering the enemy's weapons, then flanking to take their artillery. Cavalry would be best for that, wouldn't it?"

Dao Xuan Tianzun gave a subtle nod.

Bai Mao grinned. "Heh. I'm starting to understand this general business."

His confidence lasted exactly ten seconds—until Wang Cheng'en snapped,

"Erect chevaux-de-frise here, cover both flanks! Archers and crossbowmen behind them. Cannons between the barriers!"

Bai Mao froze. So... the "insight" he'd just discovered had been common military practice for centuries.

"What now?" he muttered helplessly.

Dao Xuan Tianzun chuckled softly.

"War isn't won by cleverness, Bai Mao—it's won by wealth. When you can't outthink your enemy, out-produce him. If four cannons can't break their walls, bring fifty. Strategy is seasoning; victory is national power—and national power comes from science, labor, and invention, not plunder."

Bai Mao caught pieces of it. What he did grasp was this: Dao Xuan Tianzun despised thieves who only took and never built.

He lowered his voice. "Dao Xuan Tianzun... so Wang Jiayin's finished?"

Li Daoxuan raised his plush hand, intending to divine fate—but then paused, remembering that plush paws had no fingers to pinch. He sighed and simply declared,

"He won't die this time."

Bai Mao blinked. "Really?"

He thought it through.

"Yes... the imperial army's only twenty thousand. Enough to defeat him, not to destroy him. Spread that thin around a siege, and the ring has gaps. If Wang Jiayin's half as smart as he thinks he is, he'll gather his hundred thousand at one point and punch through."

Dao Xuan Tianzun's wooden head nodded approvingly. "Very good. He'll escape—but he'll abandon the old, the weak, and the women. Prepare to receive another batch of surrendered rebels."

"Understood, Dao Xuan Tianzun."

"And Bai Mao," the puppet added slyly, "earn some merit. Get yourself promoted. Maybe an official post in the Ming army."

"Me? An official?"

"Truly," Dao Xuan Tianzun purred. "Once you're an officer, you can raise troops of your own."

Bai Mao's eyes widened. Ah. The Gao Family Village Militia had begun the same way—private soldiers legitimized through paperwork. The god was playing the long game again.

But how did a mortal climb that ladder of merit?

"South," Dao Xuan Tianzun said.

Just one word, but it cracked open like thunder.

Bai Mao straightened, fire in his chest. He strode to Wang Cheng'en and bowed.

"General, I request permission to travel south and scout!"

Hequ lay to the north. So... south?

Wang Cheng'en nearly laughed. Coward, he thought. The silk-clad brat's looking for an excuse to run. But Liang Shixian—their supply lord—had vouched for this man. Wang Cheng'en couldn't offend the hand that fed him.

He waved irritably. "Fine, go south. Just don't panic my soldiers."

Bai Mao saluted and slipped away, leaving the camp's roar behind.

In a quiet ravine he found a narrow pass—a perfect ambush point. There, he settled behind a rock, pulling out a fowling piece that looked like an ordinary musket but hid rifled grooves inside the barrel.

That twist of metal meant range, precision... superiority.

He rested it on his knee and waited. The puppet of Dao Xuan Tianzun perched beside the muzzle, its lacquered face gleaming like a lantern.

Two hunters. One divine, one mortal. Both silent.

Chapter 467 "Wang Xiaohua, Your Humble Subordinate"

The Battle for Hequ County had begun.

It was not a clash that unfolded with elegance or heroic rhythm, but a roaring, shaking, gunpowder-devouring monster that gnawed at stone, flesh, and silver alike. Cannons thundered day and night, their voices never truly fading, only pausing long enough for the echoes to roll back from the hills. Each blast tore chunks from the city walls and, just as mercilessly, burned holes through the Ming treasury itself.

The imperial army had dragged in every cannon they could scrape together from across Shanxi. Iron pieces blackened with age, bronze guns polished smooth by generations of hands, old Portuguese

cannons bought or seized long ago, and new locally forged monsters whose barrels still smelled of fresh casting. When the barrage began in earnest, the earth trembled beneath the feet of men like a fever-struck ox, shuddering and groaning as if it might collapse outright.

Inside the walls, Wang Jiayin's rebel army answered with pitiful means. They possessed only two Western cannons, trophies seized from Wang Guoliang in an earlier victory, and even those were rendered nearly useless by the reality of war. Powder dwindled, shot ran short, and each thunderous reply cost more than they could afford. Their ammunition disappeared faster than a beggar's patience at a closed gate.

The outcome of such a duel was never truly in doubt.

Artillery cared nothing for courage or reputation. It obeyed only numbers and supply.

And Wang Jiayin was running dry.

Within the city, chaos spread like an invisible sickness. Morale fractured first among the common soldiers, then among officers, until despair thickened the air like a clinging fog. A whisper passed from mouth to mouth, carried without sound yet understood by all.

"It's over. We're finished."

When men believe their fate is sealed, silver becomes sharper than blades, and rumors cut deeper than spears.

That night, beneath smoke-darkened skies and cold moonlight, imperial agents slipped into the city through forgotten wells and neglected drainage tunnels. Gatekeepers were bribed, patrols distracted, and words chosen with exquisite care. They found Wang Jiayin's cousin, Wang Guozhong, and poured sweet poison into his ear.

"The Emperor forgives quickly," they murmured. "Titles, mansions, gold. All you need to do is open one gate."

By dawn, the East Gate creaked open, slow and quiet, like the grin of a traitor who already tasted reward.

Through it surged Cao Wenzhao, the court's ferocious general, leading imperial troops in a brutal rush. Hequ County exploded into bedlam. Cannon fire, screams, and clashing steel merged into a single deafening storm that swallowed thought and command alike.

Zijing Liang, also known as Wang Ziyong, Bai Yuzhu, Chuang Wang Gao Yingxiang, Zhang Xianzhong, Bu Zhan Ni, every rebel lord lost his nerve at once. Each gathered his own followers and fled through different gates, abandoning banners, drums, and any pretense of order. One hundred thousand desperate men poured out of the city in every direction, and the imperial encirclement of twenty thousand buckled under the sheer force of panic.

You could not contain a flood with a fishing net.

Amid the confusion, Wang Jiayin himself broke southward, guarded closely by his most loyal shadow, a grim and silent man known only as Black Fiend.

Far to the south, in quiet woodland untouched by fire or shouting, Bai Mao had been waiting since dawn. The small puppet of Dao Xuan Tianzun perched on his shoulder, its stitched face unreadable, its presence oddly comforting. Bai Mao gnawed through his last strip of dried jerky as distant cannon fire rolled across the hills, each boom tugging at his nerves.

In his mind echoed the calm voice of Dao Xuan Tianzun.

"South."

So he waited.

Then it came.

A scattered, terrified column of soldiers flooded through the valley below him, no banners raised, no ranks held, just men running with fear painted plainly on their faces. Bai Mao's pulse quickened as he pressed himself against the rocks, his rifled musket already loaded and steady in his hands.

He recognized faces among them, men he had once seen laughing around campfires or looting villages under rebel banners.

Then he saw him.

Wang Jiayin.

Bai Mao aligned the barrel with the rebel king's head, breath slowing as the world narrowed to that single point.

"Spirits of Heaven, Spirits of Earth," he murmured, "may Dao Xuan Tianzun guide my hand."

He pulled the trigger.

Bang.

At that exact instant, Black Fiend stepped forward, placing himself between his lord and the unseen danger. The bullet punched cleanly through Black Fiend's skull, dropping him without a sound. Blood splashed across Wang Jiayin's face as he recoiled in horror.

"Ambush! Imperial ambush!"

The rebels surged forward in blind panic, scattering southward and vanishing into the mountain fog. Bai Mao lowered his musket and cursed under his breath. The noose had tightened, but not closed.

When the smoke thinned, he descended into the valley, hoisted Black Fiend's corpse over his shoulder, and began the long march north toward Wang Cheng'en's camp.

Hequ County, after the battle.

Inside the old county yamen, General Du Wenhuan sat in the high seat, surveying a hall that had been grotesquely transformed during Wang Jiayin's brief and foolish reign. The magistrate's modest chamber had become a vulgar parody of royalty. A throne draped in tiger skins, silk hung thick on the walls, gold goblets looted from who knew where, and a grand sign proclaiming, "The Single King Who Spans the Heavens."

Du Wenhuan curled his lip in disgust.

"A bandit playing emperor," he sneered. "Pathetic nouveau riche nonsense."

He slammed his hand down.

"Has Wang Jiayin been captured?"

Cao Wenzhao bowed stiffly. "He escaped."

"Zijing Liang?"

"He escaped."

"Bai Yuzhu?"

"He escaped."

"Even Chuang Wang Gao Yingxiang?"

"He also escaped."

"Heaven's sake!" Du Wenhuan roared, flinging a teacup that shattered across the floor. "Did everyone escape? What am I to tell His Majesty, that we captured their horses?"

"Our encirclement was too thin," Cao Wenzhao said helplessly. "Twenty thousand against one hundred thousand. We couldn't seal every gap."

Du Wenhuan paced, teeth clenched. "Useless, all of you..."

A soldier burst in. "Report! Shaanxi Regional Commander Wang Cheng'en has arrived with good news!"

"Good news?" Du Wenhuan snapped. "Did the rebels trip over their own swords?"

"He has captured a major rebel general."

That cooled Du Wenhuan's fury to a controlled simmer. "Very well. Let him in."

Moments later, Wang Cheng'en entered, followed by Bai Mao, who carried Black Fiend's corpse over his shoulder like a sack of grain. The officers recognized the dead man instantly.

"Black Fiend. Wang Jiayin's right-hand butcher."

Du Wenhuan's anger vanished, replaced by calculation and satisfaction. "Excellent. One dead Black Fiend is worth ten escaped bandits. Wang Cheng'en, you've earned credit."

"The credit belongs to this officer under my command," Wang Cheng'en said, gesturing to Bai Mao.

All eyes turned toward him. Lean, armored, dust-streaked, with the ragged puppet of Dao Xuan Tianzun perched proudly on his shoulder, he stood straight and silent.

Du Wenhuan frowned. "Your name and post?"

Bai Mao hesitated. His bandit name could never be spoken here. He blurted the first safe name that came to mind.

"Your humble subordinate, Wang Xiaohua of Chengcheng County, serving as centurion under General Wang."

"Wang... Xiaohua?"

The room paused. A name like Little Flower did not exactly inspire martial awe. A few officers failed to fully hide their amusement.

"No wonder he carries a doll," someone muttered.

Du Wenhuan ignored them. Merit mattered more than dignity.

"Wang Xiaohua, you slew a major rebel commander. Your achievements will be reported to the court. I hereby promote you to battalion commander. Serve loyally and bring glory to the Ming."

Bai Mao bowed deeply, his face solemn, his heart grinning like a gambler who had struck gold.

A battalion commander meant four hundred and forty men.

Perfect.

The puppet of Dao Xuan Tianzun on his shoulder tilted slightly, as if sharing in the smile.

Trivia :

"Why So Many Betrayals in Ancient Wars?"

1. Yes — Most of These Betrayals Really Happened.

The tales of generals or city officials secretly opening gates, switching sides, or assassinating their own lords are not fiction invented for drama. Ming and late Yuan–era military records are full of such accounts.

In the late Ming alone (1620s–1640s), nearly every major rebel siege — from Li Zicheng's campaigns in Shaanxi to Zhang Xianzhong's in Sichuan — ended with defection or betrayal rather than annihilation.

Even imperial officers did it. Generals like Wu Sangui famously opened the Great Wall to the Qing — the single most consequential betrayal in Chinese history.

2. Why Was Loyalty So Fragile?

Ancient loyalty wasn't the modern, patriotic type we imagine today. It was transactional — built on personal bonds, pay, and survival.

Here's why it broke so often:

a. Weak Central Authority:

The Ming bureaucracy was overstretched, and local armies were semi-independent. Commanders often paid their own soldiers. When the court delayed salaries or grain (which was frequent during famine and corruption), loyalty evaporated.

b. Pragmatism Over Honor:

In a collapsing regime, survival outweighed ideals. Soldiers and officials calculated:

"Why die for a doomed lord when I can switch sides and live comfortably?"

Betrayal wasn't seen as sin so much as clever timing.

c. Bandit Origins of Rebel Forces:

Many armies, like Wang Jiayin's, came from bandit backgrounds. These weren't disciplined, oath-bound troops; they were loose coalitions of survivalists. Their "loyalty" was to whoever could feed them.

d. No Professional Identity:

There was no national army in the modern sense — soldiers served generals, not nations. If a general fell, so did his men's allegiance.

e. The Culture of Opportunism:

Late imperial China revered success more than sentiment. A successful defector could later claim moral justification:

"I was serving the true emperor all along."

3. The Irony of History:

Because of this culture, betrayal became a survival mechanism — and sometimes, the only reason some states endured as long as they did. Even emperors learned to bribe or co-opt traitors instead of condemning them. It was cheaper, faster, and more predictable than loyalty.

Chapter 468 Only Two Hundred Forty Men

Wang Xiaohua's killing of the notorious Black Fiend was, without question, a major achievement, one worthy of formal commendation and promotion within the army.

Yet this merit would never truly leave the military's own closed circle.

When the time came to submit the official memorial to the Emperor, the wording would be polished, rearranged, and reassigned without the slightest hesitation. On paper, it would become: Under the wise command of Grand General Du Wenhuan, Shaanxi Regional Commander Wang Cheng'en personally led the assault, charged bravely at the forefront, and slew the rebel general Black Fiend.

Du Wenhuan would gain credit.

Wang Cheng'en would gain credit.

As for Wang Xiaohua, the man who had actually pulled the trigger, his name would never reach the Emperor's ears.

Fortunately, Bai Mao truly did not care in the slightest.

At heart, he was still a raw, unpolished rebel, a diehard follower of Wang Er of Baishui, steeped in the original spirit of the late Ming peasant uprisings. If one were to speak of revolutionary fervor, he was in many ways even more uncompromising than the older generation of Gao Family Village. Ambition within the imperial bureaucracy held little attraction for him.

In fact, this very lack of desire made him the perfect person to infiltrate enemy ranks.

As the great generals began gathering together to discuss their next moves, Bai Mao quietly retreated to a corner of the hall. Lowering his voice, he spoke to the cloth puppet perched on his shoulder.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, I've secured the post of battalion commander. That's four hundred forty soldiers under my name now. The next step is to bring in our own people and replace the existing garrison troops, right?"

Li Daoxuan fell silent for a moment, frowning slightly as he considered the situation.

In the late Ming, the lives of garrison soldiers were already miserable beyond words. They barely survived on meager stipends, often unpaid for months or even years. If these troops were suddenly

dismissed, they would instantly lose what little livelihood they had, and many of them would almost certainly drift straight into banditry.

That would be a disaster.

Gao Family Village claimed to reform bandits and give people a path back to stability. If it also pushed desperate soldiers into becoming outlaws, such righteousness would be nothing more than a hollow slogan.

"These men must be kept," the puppet of Dao Xuan Tianzun said calmly. "Our own people will join, but the garrison troops must remain as well. Both sides will be used."

Bai Mao blinked, genuinely confused. "Then won't there be too many people? If the court notices an overstrength battalion, wouldn't they suspect rebellion and ruin all our careful planning?"

The puppet's embroidered mouth curved faintly upward in a knowing smile. "Just watch."

Bai Mao's expression filled with question marks.

He did not have to wait long for an answer.

When the garrison soldiers assigned to him by Wang Cheng'en arrived to report for duty, Bai Mao personally stood there and counted them one by one. He counted slowly, carefully, unwilling to miss a single man.

When he finished, his heart sank.

There were only two hundred forty soldiers.

Not only that, but this unit somehow had four centurions, each commanding a little over fifty men.

Cold sweat immediately broke out along Bai Mao's back. "What is going on here? Aren't there supposed to be four hundred forty men?"

One of the centurions, surnamed Zhao, stepped forward. He looked at Bai Mao with the faintly amused, faintly pitying gaze reserved for a complete newcomer. "General Wang," he said lazily, "there's nothing wrong with the numbers."

Bai Mao stared at him. "Nothing wrong? Am I counting wrong, or are you? Four centurions should command four hundred forty men in total. Why are there only two hundred forty here?"

Centurion Zhao leaned closer and lowered his voice. "This battalion has been like this for more than a hundred years. Every commander before you accepted it as standard. The pay for the missing two hundred soldiers is still issued in full. That surplus, General, is meant for you."

"If we truly brought all four hundred forty men," he added quietly, "you wouldn't have a single extra coin left at the end of the month."

Bai Mao let out a sharp, incredulous sound. "Pfft."

Centurion Zhao secretly shook his head. This new general really was green. Anyone else would be overjoyed at the thought of pocketing the stipends of two hundred men. Instead, this one looked vaguely disgusted.

At last, Bai Mao understood what Dao Xuan Tianzun had meant by "no overstaffing."

The idea was simple. Keep these two hundred forty garrison soldiers, then quietly add two hundred men from Gao Family Village.

He gave a short, humorless laugh. "No wonder these garrison troops fight like wet paper. So even an army that claims ten thousand men only has six thousand or so actually present?"

"Six thousand?" Centurion Zhao muttered. "That's generous. A general who can gather five thousand is already considered upright."

Bai Mao could not help sneering. "Aren't those grand generals afraid of losing battles?"

Dao Xuan Tianzun's voice sounded softly in his ear. "Why would they be? They all maintain private troops. The stipends from those phantom soldiers are used to raise loyal house guards, men desperate enough to die for them. In battle, the house guards charge forward. The garrison troops stay behind."

Bai Mao nodded slowly, a look of sudden clarity crossing his face. "I understand now. When our people arrive from Gao Family Village, we'll list them as my personal guards."

After hastily reorganizing his pitifully undermanned battalion, Bai Mao returned to the main hall.

The assembled generals were already deep in discussion.

A scout stood before them, reporting in a loud, steady voice. "Wang Jiayin has fled south. Only Zijing Liang and Bai Yuzhu remain with him, and their combined forces are now no more than fifty or sixty thousand."

"As for Chuǎng Wang Gao Yingxiang, the West Camp Eight Great Kings Zhang Xianzhong, Lao Huihui Ma Shouying, Cao Cao, and the others, they have all broken away and scattered in different directions."

Du Wenhuan pondered briefly before speaking. "We do not have the manpower to chase every rebel leader. The Emperor wants Wang Jiayin's head. The rest can be pacified later. Our focus remains solely on Wang Jiayin."

The generals saluted in unison. "Understood."

With the strategy decided, the next steps were clear. They would pursue southward and ignore everything else.

Du Wenhuan then raised another issue. "When Wang Jiayin broke through the encirclement, more than thirty thousand of his people were left behind in Hequ County. Old men, the sick, women, children. They could not flee with the rebels and remain inside the city. What should be done with them?"

A heavy silence fell over the hall.

Every military man present thought of the same answer.

Kill them.

Yet no one dared to say it aloud. Whoever spoke first would become the target of endless accusations from the civil officials preaching pacification. The blame would be pinned on that single voice.

It was an impossible problem, even for seasoned administrators, let alone a hall full of generals.

At that moment, the cloth hand of Dao Xuan Tianzun gently tapped Bai Mao's cheek.

"Suggest entrusting them to Censor Wu Shen."

Understanding dawned instantly.

Bai Mao stepped forward, clasped his fists, and spoke clearly. "Your humble subordinate has a proposal."

The generals' eyes lit up at once. Excellent. Someone willing to take responsibility had finally stepped forward.

Du Wenhuan forced a strained smile, his anger barely contained beneath it. "Commander Wang, let us hear it."

Around him, the other generals silently urged him on. Say it. Say the word. Take the blame.

Bai Mao continued evenly, "Censor Wu Shen arrived with one hundred thousand taels of silver for the purpose of pacifying the rebels. These thirty thousand family members were part of that rebellion. By all logic, they should be handed over to Censor Wu Shen for disposition."

The hall fell silent once more.

Chapter 469 Now My Heart Feels at Ease

The instant Bai Mao voiced his proposal, the entire hall of military officers fell into a brief, stunned silence, followed by an unspoken chorus of amazement rising in their hearts.

Bloody hell, this man was brilliant.

Only moments earlier, everyone present had been quietly calculating how to shove this festering problem onto someone else's shoulders, preferably one of their peers, so they themselves could emerge unscathed. Yet this Battalion Commander Wang had taken a far bolder step, neatly flinging the entire burden straight onto the back of Imperial Censor Wu Shen, a civil official and a political rival at that. With that single sentence, the dilemma evaporated, and not a single military officer in the room would have to bear responsibility.

This was no ordinary scapegoating.

Among officials, there were levels to the art. The lowest tier was dumping blame on one's own subordinates. The middle tier involved dragging in unrelated outsiders. But the highest tier, the pinnacle of the craft, was to push everything onto one's political enemies.

For military men, passing the blame to the civil officials was the purest expression of this upper-tier maneuver.

Du Wenhuan did not even bother to hide his admiration. He raised his thumb high. "Excellent."

Cao Wenzhao, the deputy general from Gushan, nodded repeatedly, his expression filled with sincere approval. "Truly excellent."

Wang Guoliang, the General Soldier of Shanxi, laughed aloud and said, "Battalion Commander Wang, with talent like yours, keeping you at battalion rank is a terrible waste."

Wang Cheng'en, the General Soldier of Shaanxi, immediately shot back, "Oi, Wang Guoliang, what do you mean by that? Are you trying to steal my man right in front of me?"

Wang Guoliang waved his hands hastily. "I wouldn't dare, I wouldn't dare. I only mean that such talent should not be buried. You ought to promote him quickly. Make him a thousand-household commander."

Wang Cheng'en smiled faintly. "If he earns another merit, I will certainly do so."

The generals were all in high spirits. Du Wenhuan wasted no time, drafting an official order commanding Wu Shen to come and take charge of the families of the captured rebels. He then arranged for two thousand troops to remain behind in Hequ County to manage the situation, while the rest of the army prepared to move out immediately in pursuit of Wang Jiayin.

Hexin County, Longmen Ferry.

The Yellow River flowed broad and slow beneath the winter sky, its waters carrying a muted chill. On the sandy riverbank beside the ancient ferry crossing, Shi Jian stood with a small detachment of garrison soldiers.

In name, there were a hundred men under his command, assigned to him by Wang Cheng'en. In reality, when counted properly, there were only a little over fifty.

These men were the weakest of the weak, soldiers in name only, with neither training nor morale to speak of. They had no desire to fight bandits, no appetite for danger, and no illusions of heroism. Being left behind to guard Longmen Ferry was, in their eyes, an astonishing stroke of luck. Afraid that a single misstep might send them back to the front lines, they treated Shi Jian with exaggerated obedience.

After following him for several days, they discovered that their commander was unexpectedly easygoing. He carried none of the aloofness or arrogance they associated with officials. He ate with them, spoke casually, and often told them stories to pass the time.

At this moment, the fifty-odd men were seated by the riverbank, coats loosened, enjoying the cold breeze rolling off the water as they listened to Shi Jian spin a tale.

He spoke of a soldier who helped the common folk, earned their heartfelt gratitude, and was ultimately rewarded with the hand of a villager's daughter in marriage, living thereafter in peace and contentment.

The story was completely fabricated.

Any modern listener would have spotted countless holes in it without effort. But these were simple people of an ancient age, utterly unfamiliar with the tricks of polished rhetoric and false narratives. Give them a strange device from the future, and they would likely be deceived within moments. To them, Shi Jian's tale sounded sincere, warm, and full of hope.

They listened with shining eyes. When the story ended, several of them sighed deeply.

"That's truly wonderful," one said. "Honestly, none of us want to be bad people. If we had the chance to help others, who wouldn't want to? But look at us. We're poor, starving, with nothing to our names. We want to help, but we can't."

Shi Jian smiled gently. "Don't worry. Soon enough, you will have the ability to help others."

The soldiers exchanged confused glances, faces full of question marks.

"Look at the river," Shi Jian said, raising his hand.

They turned as one, and their murmurs died away.

A large cargo ship was slowly making its way upstream. On the bow stood a figure with arms spread wide, clad in flowing Daoist robes. The hems fluttered in the river wind, giving the figure an air both solemn and otherworldly, as if an immortal had descended to stand above the mortal waters.

Shi Jian's heart skipped a beat.

"That is..." he murmured, staring. "Is that Dao Xuan Tianzun's statue placed on the bow?"

He had given the miniature Dao Xuan Tianzun puppet he carried to Bai Mao some days ago, and since then he had been unable to make contact. Now, seeing a life-sized statue standing so boldly at the front of a ship, he felt a strange sense of disorientation, as though heaven itself had drifted down the river toward him.

He hurried to the water's edge. Before the ship had even docked, he bowed deeply. "Greetings, Dao Xuan Tianzun."

The statue's eyes moved.

"No need for formalities," came a voice. "I was just standing here, imagining what it would feel like to be on the Titanic. It is a pity, though. Posing alone feels incomplete without someone beside me."

Shi Jian froze, utterly bewildered.

He did not understand a single word of that sentence. But that was only natural. Mortals were not meant to comprehend the speech of divine beings. This, surely, was what people meant by being unable to fathom divine mysteries.

The Dao Xuan Tianzun continued, "Unload the grain from the ship. Rescue the people of Hexin County as quickly as possible."

Shi Jian cupped his fists at once. "As you command."

He turned and shouted to the garrison soldiers, "Move it. Start unloading the grain immediately. Send one man to Hexin County city and summon the refugees there. Tell them they will be fed, and paid three catties of flour per day."

The soldiers paused, stunned, and then erupted into cheers.

One of them shouted, voice trembling with hope, "Commander Shi, will we get paid as well? I haven't received my military pay in so long. My family can barely keep the pot boiling. I want to earn those three catties of flour too."

Others chimed in eagerly, their voices overlapping. "So do we. We want to earn it too."

Shi Jian laughed and scolded them lightly. "When the refugees arrive, you will be maintaining order. How could you unload grain? Don't worry. Maintaining order will earn you wages as well."

The soldiers were overjoyed, grinning from ear to ear as they hurried off to carry out the orders.

The Dao Xuan Tianzun spoke again, the voice carrying calmly over the river. "Shi Jian, Wang Jiayin's forces have already broken through the official army's encirclement at Hequ County. They are heading south, and will reach Pingyang Prefecture within a few days."

Shi Jian's expression changed. "Pingyang Prefecture? That is dangerously close to Hexin County."

Hexin County was a subordinate county of Pingyang Prefecture, much like a smaller town clinging to the side of a major commandery. If the bandits attacked Pingyang, it was all but certain they would sweep through Hexin once again.

Anxiety crept into his voice. "Hexin was only recently looted by Bu Zhan Ni. The city walls were torn down, the people scattered and broken. If the bandits come again, it would truly be disastrous."

The Dao Xuan Tianzun sighed softly. "This will be a test of your ability. Evacuate them. Whether by persuasion, by deception, or even with blades at their throats, get the people of Hexin County city out. Move them here, near Longmen Ferry, and build wooden stockades, just as was done at Gudu Ferry on the Yellow River."

Understanding dawned on Shi Jian's face. "That way, if the bandits go to Hexin County city, they will find nothing. And since I have official troops here, constructing a water fort will be justified, and face less resistance than when Xing Honglang's people built theirs."

The Dao Xuan Tianzun smiled faintly.

This young man was sharp. Reliable. The affairs here could be entrusted to him.

The statue's eyes ceased moving. The divine presence withdrew, leaving behind only a silent effigy standing with arms outstretched, robes catching the wind on the bow in a majestic, frozen pose.

Shi Jian sensed that Dao Xuan Tianzun had returned to the heavens. What remained before him was merely a statue.

I gave the miniature Dao Xuan Tianzun puppet I carried for protection to Bai Mao, he thought. Now I do not even have a statue by my side. No wonder my heart feels uneasy.

Dao Xuan Tianzun, please forgive my presumption.

He leapt onto the ship, hoisted the statue onto his back with a grunt, carried it ashore, and set it carefully atop a tall rock beside Longmen Ferry.

When it was firmly in place, Shi Jian clapped his hands together, brushing off the dust.

With Dao Xuan Tianzun's statue by his side, his heart finally felt at ease.

Chapter 470 A New Heavenly Tome

Li Daoxuan withdrew his co-sensing from the Dao Xuan Tianzun's Titanic Avatar just in time to hear the knock at his door.

Lunch had arrived.

Cumin-spiced, hand-torn ribs.

Civilization truly peaked at this moment.

He held a rib in his left hand, grease glistening like holy oil, while his right hand casually tapped the diorama box, switching viewpoints and surveying his ever-expanding "divine domain."

Mm. Tender. Smoky. Slightly salty.

His territory, meanwhile, was expanding at a similarly alarming rate.

Xing Honglang's Gudu Ferry continued selling grain and acquiring salt with the enthusiasm of a man who had discovered both capitalism and faith at the same time. The "grace of Dao Xuan Tianzun" spread outward like spilled ink—no, like spilled porridge—saving people wherever it reached.

Imperial Censor Wu Shen, on the other hand, was sweating bullets, frantically herding refugees toward Gao Family Village like a man desperately trying to empty the ocean with a spoon.

In recent days, the Salvation Index had shot up so fast it felt like it might pull a muscle.

Li Daoxuan's field of vision expanded again—another few dozen miles, just like that.

Baishui County was now almost entirely within sight. More than half of Dali County peeked in as well, and even Huanglong Mountain to the north had wandered into view, as if asking politely whether it could also be saved.

Seeing this, Li Daoxuan issued several consecutive divine edicts to San Shier:

Transport grain.

Distribute the Dao Xuan Tianzun's Demon-Slaying Chronicles.

Repeat. Relentlessly.

Thus began the quiet infiltration of Baishui and Dali Counties by faith, food, and extremely persuasive logistics.

Daoist Master Ma and Madam San set out in opposite directions—one to Baishui, one to Dali—each carrying scripture, conviction, and the unmistakable air of people about to be very busy for the rest of their lives.

The result?

Gao Family Village's so-called "civil administration" collapsed under the weight.

San Shier and Tan Liwen worked like spinning tops, dispatching supplies nonstop—to Yongji Gudu Ferry, Dragon Gate Ferry, Baishui County, Dali County—

Grain carts rolled day and night.

Porters moved until their shoulders went numb.

Stopping was not an option. Stopping meant famine. Famine meant chaos. Chaos meant paperwork. Nobody wanted paperwork.

Li Daoxuan gnawed thoughtfully on a rib, eyes sweeping over the endless transport teams filing out of Gao Family Village.

"...Huh."

He frowned.

"The number of porters is clearly less than before."

And he was right.

Gao Family Village's pool of pure manual labor was shrinking by the day.

People were upgrading.

Once someone learned a skill—blacksmithing, carpentry, casting—they looked at hauling sacks of grain the way scholars looked at digging latrines.

Hard pass.

This only worsened the strain on the logistics system.

The pressure was mounting.

Right on cue, a furious clamor erupted from the Craftsman Well.

Tiny figures waved their arms. Voices overlapped. Someone was definitely shouting.

Li Daoxuan sighed, flicked grease off his fingers, and shifted his focus.

The moment his perspective snapped into place, Li Da's voice came roaring out:

"Are you out of your minds?! Xu Dafu and I nearly died squeezing out the Chassepot breech-loading rifle, and now you've taken my blacksmiths away? How am I supposed to mass-produce firearms? Wishful thinking? Prayer?"

Xu Dafu stood beside him, nodding so hard it looked like his head might detach.

Young Master Bai slammed his sleeve against a workbench. "You think you're the only one suffering? I'm building locomotive engines! Engines! And railway tracks! Each one eats iron like a starving tiger. Where are my blacksmiths?"

Gao Yiyi pinched the bridge of her nose, looking one breath away from murder. "All of you, calm down! Calm. Down. I need blacksmiths too! Cannons don't forge themselves. Neither do sickles, hoes, iron pots, spearheads, arrowheads—what, do you want the common people to fight bandits with harsh language?"

Li Da pointed accusingly. "My rifles were personally decreed by Dao Xuan Tianzun in the seventh year of Tianqi! Mass production! Divine priority! Give me the blacksmiths!"

Young Master Bai snorted. "My locomotives are also a divine edict. Meant to cross the land and shake the earth. Figure it out yourselves."

Gao Yiyi exploded. "My cannon barrels were bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzun Himself! If that's not a divine edict, what is?! Don't act like you're special!"

"The Tianzun is on my side!"

"He clearly favors me!"

"Mine was explained personally!"

"I heard it directly!"

Li Daoxuan watched in silence, rib halfway to his mouth.

...Wonderful.

They were fighting over divine favoritism like children arguing over who their father loved more—except the father was a Daoist god, and the argument involved industrial capacity.

At its core, though, the problem was simple.

Manpower.

Europe had run into this same wall centuries ago. Sparse population. Growing industry. Not enough hands.

And Europe had solved it the only way possible.

Efficiency.

Li Daoxuan's eyes sharpened.

Interchangeable parts.

Standardization.

Mass production.

He stopped chewing.

Without hesitation, he pulled up several modern articles explaining standardization and industrial workflows, converted them into classical Chinese with one click, printed them, and dropped the stack straight onto the rooftop of Gao Family Village School.

On the roof, Song Yingxing was already surrounded by half-understood machines and unsolved questions when a massive book descended from the heavens and landed with a thump.

His heart skipped.

A Heavenly Book!

No—

A Dao Xuan Tianzun Heavenly Book!

He scrambled onto it like a man afraid it might vanish if he blinked and flipped the first page.

"...Oh."

His eyes widened.

"Oh?!"

"If parts are standardized... molds created... separate forging... later assembly..."

His breathing quickened.

"So one blacksmith doesn't need to make an entire firearm... each person forges one part... assembly later..."

He nearly laughed.

"It can be done like this?!"

Song Yingxing threw his head back, overjoyed. "Incredible! Truly incredible! A Heavenly Book lives up to its name!"

Li Daoxuan watched from above, satisfied.

This would take time. Standardization sounded simple, but implementation would be brutal. Song Yingxing would need days—weeks—to even begin testing it.

But at least the path was clear.

Before that, however, there was another bottleneck.

Training.

The Craftsman Well still relied on old masters teaching apprentices, one by one, slowly and painfully.

That would not survive industrialization.

It was time for something new.

A vocational school.

And then—

Li Daoxuan froze.

"...Ah."

There was one more thing.

A military academy.

A familiar bald head flashed through his mind.

He twitched.

No. Absolutely not.

He forcibly shoved the image away and refocused.

Gao Family Village lacked anyone qualified to lead such an academy. Their commanders—Cheng Xu, Fang Wushang, Lao Nanfeng—were capable, but none had formal military education or large-scale command experience.

Teaching warfare required more than bravery.

It required lineage, theory, and blood-soaked experience.

"If only..." Li Daoxuan murmured, "...there were a man from a true military family. Someone steeped in treatises and war."

He sighed.

But where would such a person appear?

History, unfortunately, did not spawn heroes on demand.

Not even for gods.